

The Charlotte St. Risk

By John B. Oakes

It is 18 bleak acres of bulldozer-flattened rubble, punctuated — and almost surrounded — by burned-out or half-deserted buildings. Their gaping windows look down on a scene as desolate as if it were set in a dead crater of the moon instead of amidst the living volcano of the South Bronx.

It is the site of the Charlotte Street project, a \$32 million low-rise cooperative-housing proposal that has just been railroaded — or, more precisely bulldozed — through New York City's Board of Estimate primarily because a year ago President Carter's advance man happened to pick this location as the most dramatic spot in New York for Mr. Carter to be photographed demonstrating his commitment to the cause of urban rehabilitation. His televised appearance there was a brilliant stroke of public relations for the President and for the local politicians, who promptly seized on that barren backdrop of wasteland as the top priority area most deserving of instant rejuvenation. But the gravest doubts exist that this is the best place — or even a good place — to begin, in the absence of an overall plan or promise of future support for the massive task of rehabilitation of the South Bronx, on which \$2.2 billion has already been spent in the past decade with but minimal results.

Yet by the time that "Charlotte Street" had reached New York City's top legislative body for approval last week, in a hearing room packed with stridently vocal supporters, including construction workers wearing their hard hats, the project had taken on a life of its own. It had become — as Deputy Mayor Herman Badillo, its No. 1 protagonist, proclaimed — "a symbol of the urban crisis." Somehow a

vote for or against this one project had become a vote for or against the South Bronx — and only one member of the board, the borough president of Manhattan, dared to vote against it.

This is the project that a doubt-racked City Planning Commission, expressing its "serious concerns," forced itself to approve — but only as "a leap of faith." Translation: We don't think much of this project but we're under political pressures and we're taking not so much a leap of faith as a leap in the dark. Edward Logue, director of South Bronx redevelopment, favoring Charlotte Street, agrees that "it's a leap of faith" — but, he says, that's what city rebuilding is all about.

What's wrong with Charlotte Street? The main thing is that despite all the ballyhoo, it stands a very good chance of failing the very community it is supposed to save, and becoming just one more in the long list of the city's inadequately planned housing projects doomed before they start. The special danger is that an initial disaster there would destroy public confidence in the whole South Bronx Redevelopment Program — and with it all chance of the necessary future Federal help for which there is only the shakiest commitment at best. As one planner said, "I'm afraid the Charlotte Street Project may be — three years from now — our Vietnam."

So far Washington has come up with a minuscule \$65 to \$75 million in new money for diverse projects or parts of projects in the entire South Bronx area; but the Charlotte Street cooperative contains no new Federal money at all, nor is it even mentioned in President Carter's proposals for housing

and other forms of assistance in the area that were announced earlier this year. It does represent a major chunk (the Planning Commission says 25 percent but that figure is in dispute) of the entire citywide allocation of the New York City Housing Authority for 1977 and 1978. The charge is made (and denied) that the proposed complex is not intimately linked to a viable community but "will stand there alone," without adequate support services, an isolated "island against a sea of abandonment and destruction." What the Charlotte Street proposal lacks, says the Planning Commission, is "a comprehensive development plan which adequately addresses the physical, economic and social human services for the people" who live there. New housing alone cannot revive a deteriorating (or, as in the case of Charlotte Street, a deteriorated) area. Other planners point out in objecting to the city's enormous commitment to this one project that there are many other sites in the South Bronx — perhaps less dramatic but certainly more viable than Charlotte Street — where in-

vestment in new housing would build on already existing strengths in communities that still are capable of stabilization, instead of having to be recreated virtually from scratch.

But, like those houses that have achieved immortality because George Washington slept there, Charlotte Street has become the touchstone of South Bronx redevelopment because Jimmy Carter stood there.

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